

Saigon Coup Hurts Position of Harkins



Associated Press
Gen. Paul D. Harkins

By DAVID HALBERSTAM
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Nov. 12 -- The coup d'etat by South Vietnam's military leaders this month has weakened the position of Gen. Paul D. Harkins, the highest United States military official here.

To junta members, General Harkins is a symbol of the old order.

It is believed that junta leaders have quietly let the United States Embassy know their feelings about General Harkins, though they have made no direct request for action concerning him.

In the last two months the Pentagon's approach toward the South Vietnamese regime that was later overthrown

differed from the State Department's. This was seen in different appraisals by Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and General Harkins.

Mr. Lodge was concerned with the deteriorating political climate in the country under President Ngo Dinh Diem and was not convinced that the war against Communist guerrillas was going well. However, General Harkins said in both private and public statements that the war effort was going well and the crisis over the repression of Buddhists had not affected troop morale.

Other Reports Differed

General Harkins's statements contradicted most private reports at the time. Since the coup, South Vietnam's ruling generals have contended that they overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem because the war was not being won under the Ngo family, political control was hamstringing the army and the Buddhist crisis had taken a heavy toll of army morale.

When the South Vietnamese generals made their contact with Americans before the coup, they did not approach General Harkins. Reliable sources say this was because they feared that the United States military would get in touch with the Presidential Palace.

What is involved here in part is the fact that high Vietnamese military officers had very little influence under the Ngo family's rule. Thus, it is contended, for General Harkins as the American military mission head to have effectiveness, he had to exert his influence through President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother and adviser, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

The coup has strengthened the position of Ambassador Lodge. The junta leaders trust the Ambassador and have already developed a working relationship with him. Before the coup they let Mr. Lodge know something of what they were planning.

The Junta leaders do not value General Harkins's assessment of the progress of the war in South Vietnam. Virtually everything they have said publicly and privately since coming to power has been a repudiation of his statements on the progress of the war and the effect of the Buddhist crisis.

Reliable sources here say that General Harkins was warned in advance of the coup by his subordinate officers, who knew that planning for the coup was going on.

According to these sources, on the morning of the coup General Harkins told Adm. Harry D. Felt that there were reports of a coup but that he felt they were exaggerated. Admiral Felt left for Hawaii just about the time the coup began.

Assessments Conflicted

These sources say that several days before the coup General Harkins told Ambassador Lodge that there would not be a coup and that on the morning of the coup itself a message

from the Embassy and the Central Intelligence Agency to Washington said a coup was coming. The military command said it would not happen. Later in the day, after fighting had begun, the military, it is reported, telephoned the Embassy and asked that its dissent be stricken.

General Harkins issued a statement today denying any knowledge of an Embassy-C.I.A.-military message to Washington on the coup and said therefore that there had been no request for a deletion. Embassy sources said the message was sent.

A statement issued with General Harkins's approval tonight also denied that there had been warnings of the coup that morning by subordinate officers. This contradicts what several officers themselves said.

The statement declared that the United States command had not been notified until 1:45 P.M. at which point "they [the South Vietnamese generals] regretted not having been able to take us into their confidence but considered absolute secrecy paramount to the success of their plan."

The statement added: "This headquarters was aware of certain troop movements and dispositions on the morning of Nov. 1 but cover plans had been

so well conceived and implemented that the imminence of a coup d'etat was not apparent."

The statement was regarded as in effect acknowledging that unlike other high members of the United States military mission, General Harkins had no prior warning about the coup from the plotters themselves.

Lodge Held Spokesman

Observers here predict that it will be Ambassador Lodge who speaks for the United States mission. In the last two months the mission has spoken with two voices, indicating a basic split between the State Department and the Pentagon.

There is also a strong feeling among many Embassy members that although there was general agreement on policy during the era of Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting Jr., Mr. Lodge's predecessor, General Harkins dominated Mr. Nolting.

Though Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins are old friends from Boston, it is reliably reported here that their relationship has cooled considerably since Mr. Lodge's arrival. Some of the generals now in the situation or con-

sider him particularly well informed.

U.S. Aides Voice Confidence

Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, Nov. 12 -- Defense Department officials expressed complete confidence today in General Harkins.

Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, was asked about a report that the new South Vietnamese regime regarded General Harkins as having been too closely affiliated with the overthrown Ngo Dinh Diem Government and was therefore exerting pressure to have General Harkins removed.

Mr. Sylvester commented: "The idea of any pressure having any effect is absolute baloney."